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S. Africa trying to revive U.N. racism meeting

September 4, 2001 Posted: 3:18 AM EDT (0718 GMT)

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DURBAN, South Africa (CNN) --
South Africa was trying to salvage a
U.N. conference on racism by
drawing up a new text on the issue of
the Mideast, according to delegates
from the European Union.

The United States and Israel walked out of the World Conference Against Racism on Monday to protest a draft of the conference's final declaration that denounced "practices of racial discrimination against the Palestinians as well as other inhabitants of the Arab occupied territories" by Israel and said Zionism "is based on racial superiority."

Negotiations to soften those statements failed, U.S. delegates said, and Secretary of State Colin Powell -- who did not attend the conference -- assailed its "hateful language" as he announced the U.S. withdrawal Monday.

Israeli officials followed shortly afterward, with Foreign Minister Shimon Peres calling the conference "a farce."

"We are talking about human rights," Peres said. "The first human right is to remain alive, and Israel is in danger. We are exercising the most important human right."

European diplomats likewise said the language was unacceptable, Reuters reported.

"The 15 [EU states] have mandated me to accept the proposal made by my colleague [South African Foreign Minister Nkosazana] Dlamini-Zuma, which consists in drafting a completely new text that could lead to consensus," Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel told a news conference. Belgium holds the rotating EU presidency.

A EU spokesman said the South African minister planned to invite a special group -- including members of the EU -- to work overnight on the document. He declined to say whether the EU would withdraw if a

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CNN's Tumi Makgabo talks to U.S. Rep. Tom Lantos about the U.S. withdrawal (September 3)



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compromise were not reached.

(September 3)

The spokesman said South Africa would start with a Norwegian proposal rejected earlier by Arab states pressing for a condemnation of Israel for its treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories.

The Norwegian wording, which has not been released, contained some reference to the Palestinian issue and had been accepted by Washington.

Monday's U.S. and Israeli withdrawal stunned the conference and dismayed its hosts. South Africa called the move "unfortunate and unnecessary," and South African Human Rights Commissioner Barney Pityana told CNN, "I think there is an explanation necessary."

Pityana said there was little danger of the objectionable language making it into a final declaration. "The rules of this conference are by consensus, and it appears from where I was sitting that there wasn't going to be consensus because the U.S. and Israel were not alone," he said. "They were certainly with the Western group, and the African group was largely silent these issues."

Rep. Tom Lantos, D-California, a member of the U.S. delegation, said the conference draft unfairly singled out Israel.

"This conference was designed to deal with discrimination globally," Lantos said. "Instead, it has focused on one country in a punitive fashion."

The Palestinian-Israeli dispute has overshadowed discussion of other issues conference organizers said should top the agenda, including contemporary slavery, caste discrimination, rights of indigenous peoples and gender discrimination.

Peres said Israel had been unfairly labeled a colonialist nation by members of the conference. He accused the Arab League of leading a concerted effort to single out Israel for blame in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Palestinians accused the U.S. delegation of being unwilling to compromise in the Norwegian-led negotiations aimed at breaking the impasse.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat said the United States should focus on "stopping Israeli practices" against the Palestinians in its occupation of

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the West Bank, not the language that describes its practices.

Added Nasser al-Qudwa, the Palestinian representative to the United Nations: "Israel has been occupying the Palestinian land for over 30 years. It has been subjecting the Palestinian nation to all kinds of discrimination, all kind of oppression, and nobody can deny this fact."

Powell said last week he would skip the conference to protest language equating Zionism -- the movement that promotes a Jewish state in Israel -- with racism.

On Sunday a parallel human rights forum composed of nongovernmental organizations called Israel a "racist apartheid state" guilty of "war crimes, acts of genocide and ethnic cleansing" in its treatment of Palestinians.

Mary Robinson, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, said the NGO declaration's language was regrettable and would almost certainly not become part of the main conference's final statement.

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